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When Does a Religion Become a Cult?

America has long been a safe harbor for experimental faiths. But the unorthodox can descend into something darker.

By

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America has probably supplied the world with more new religions than any other nation. Since the first half of the 19th century, the country's atmosphere of religious experimentation has produced dozens of movements, from Mormonism to a wide range of nature-based practices grouped under the name Wicca.

By 1970 the religious scholar Jacob Needleman popularized the term "New Religious Movements" (NRM) to classify the new faiths, or variants of old ones, that were being embraced by the Woodstock generation. But how do we tell when a religious movement ceases to be novel or unusual and becomes a cult?

It's a question with a long history in this country. The controversy involving Hollywood writer-director Paul Haggis is only its most recent occurrence. Mr. Haggis left the Church of Scientology and has accused it of abusive practices, including demands that members disconnect from their families, which the church vigorously denies.

To use the term cult too casually risks tarring the merely unconventional, for which America has long been a safe harbor. In the early 19th century, the "Burned-over District" of central New York state—so named for the religious passions of those who settled there following the Revolutionary War—gave rise to a wave of new movements, including Mormonism, Seventh-Day Adventism and Spiritualism (or talking to the dead). It was an era, as historian Sydney E.

Ahlstrom wrote, when "Farmers became theologians, offbeat village youths became bishops, odd girls became prophets."

When the California Gold Rush of 1849 enticed settlers westward, the nation's passion for religious novelty moved with them. By the early 20th century, sunny California had replaced New York as America's laboratory for avant-garde spirituality. Without the weight of tradition and the ecclesiastical structures that bring some predictability to congregational life, some movements were characterized by a make-it-up-as-you-go approach that ultimately came to redefine people, money and propriety as movable parts intended to benefit the organization.

Many academics and observers of cult phenomena, such as psychologist Philip G. Zimbardo of Stanford, agree on four criteria to define a cult. The first is behavior control, i.e., monitoring of where you go and what you do. The second is information control, such as discouraging members from reading criticism of the group. The third is thought control, placing sharp limits on doctrinal questioning. The fourth is emotional control—using humiliation or guilt. Yet at times these traits can also be detected within mainstream faiths. So I would add two more categories: financial control and extreme leadership.

Financial control translates into levying ruinous dues or fees, or effectively hiring members and placing them on stipends or sales quotas. Consider the once-familiar image of Hare Krishna devotees selling books in airports. Or a friend of mine—today a respected officer with a nonprofit organization—who recalls how his departure from the Rev. Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church was complicated by the problem of a massive hole in his résumé, reflecting the years he had financially committed himself to the church.

Problems with extremist leadership can be more difficult to spot. The most tragic cult of the last century was the Rev. Jim Jones's Peoples Temple, which ended with mass murder and suicide in the jungles of Guyana in 1978. Only a few early observers understood Jones as dangerously erratic. Known for his racially diverse San Francisco congregation, Jones was widely feted on the local political scene in the 1970s. He was not some West Coast New Ager gone bad. He emerged instead from the mainstream Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) pulpit, which sometimes lent a reassuringly Middle-American tone to his sermons.

Yet every coercive religious group harbors one telltale trait: untoward secrecy. As opposed to a cult, a religious culture ought to be as simple to enter or exit, for members or observers, as any free nation. Members should experience no impediment to relationships, ideas or travel, and the group's finances should be reasonably transparent. Its doctrine need not be conventional—but it should be knowable to outsiders. Absent those qualities, an unorthodox religion can descend into something darker.

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